

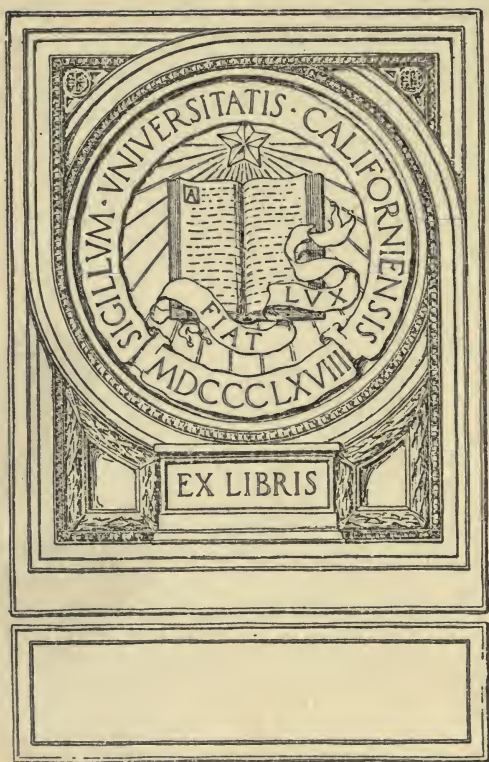
IN A
RUSSIAN
VILLAGE

CHARLES RODEN
BUXTON

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BY

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CALIFORNIA



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PREFACE

I HAVE long wished to write down the many curious things which I heard and saw among the Russian villages. If, in addition to the pleasure this gives me, my recollections are found to have a political or historical value, so much the better. But I shall quote no general statistics, and pronounce no political judgements. I shall report nothing but what I personally experienced, and what was said to me in conversation ; I may say little, but what I do say will be all first-hand.

My chief hope for this book is that it may help to make others think of Russia, not as an abstraction, not as a unit, but as a very large number of very interesting human beings, most of them lovable.

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IN A RUSSIAN VILLAGE

CHAPTER I

A June Morning in Ozero

THE central point in my Russian recollections is a certain morning in June, 1920, in the village of Ozero. Ozero is a village in the Samara "Government" or Province. It lies to the east of the Volga, and not very far from the borders of Asia.¹ It is, in fact, as far east as the head of the Persian Gulf. No Englishman, as far as I could ascertain, had ever been seen in Ozero before.

I wandered out into the village street, on that particular June morning, with a sense of deep contentment, of which the memory is still vivid. As Secretary to the British Labour Delegation, I had gone through an exhausting round of visits, interviews and entertainments. I had struggled for three weeks, note-book in hand, to record an unceasing stream of new impressions, without a moment to reflect at leisure. And all that I had seen and done had not satisfied my main desire.

Ever since I knew that I was to accompany the Delegation, I had cherished the ambition of getting right off the beaten track alone, of burying myself

¹ It is in the heart of what became, in 1921, the famine area. It is only too probable that but few of the people described in these pages are now surviving.

in the depths of the country. There had been many obstacles to surmount before the ambition could be realised. But I had managed it ; and here I was, with a clear week before me as an inhabitant of Ozero. For the first time since my arrival in Russia I was free to look round and enjoy.

My aim had been to choose a village that was typical of other Russian villages. I was not restricted in my choice. I did not know the name of this one until I approached it. I had intended to go further, but I had spent two days in driving across the great rolling downs, and my driver informed me that he had an uncle living here, and that the people living in the village were "very good people." That seemed to me as good a recommendation as any other, and I could see no special feature which distinguished the village from the others I had passed.

It was very large, like all the others in that region, where the population is concentrated and people walk incredible distances to get to their fields. The village street, along which I now strolled with my hands in my pockets, was nearly a mile long. It was immensely wide, a desert of deep dust, reminding me curiously of an Australian township. The houses were one storey buildings of wood, and at the side of each was a wide gateway, generally with a quaintly carved beam across it, which led into the *dvor* or farmyard. This stretched out to the back in a long strip. All the woodwork was bleached by the sun to a more or less uniform colour—a light, shimmering grey. A few side streets, not quite so wide, stretched away at right angles.

Shuffling along through the dust at a leisurely pace, I reached the centre of the village. It was an immense, irregular square of bare, greyish earth. Here stood the church, with the usual cluster of domes of various sizes, shaped like bulbs, and pale green in colour. There were cheap but brightly shining red tinsel ornaments at the gate and at the corners of the churchyard.

About 100 yards from the church stood the Soviet house, to which I had driven up on arrival the night before, requesting hospitality. It is the duty of the village Soviet to provide this for any holder of a travelling permit, as well as to speed him on his way with a country cart, or (as the Russian phrase is) "with horses" (*loshadami*). I felt uncomfortable in demanding these facilities. It seemed a cheeky proceeding. But they were always provided with perfect courtesy.

Turning away from what, for want of a better name, I may call the square, I set out to examine in what the outskirts of the village consisted. I found a miscellaneous collection of buildings—barns for corn, houses of the poorer peasants, a windmill or two, and, in between these, large expanses covered with blocks of what appeared to be mud, set wide apart to dry in the sun. They were, in fact, of two kinds. One was actually earth in course of being dried into large brick-like slabs for building (called *saman*); the other kind consisted of dung and straw, shaped into slabs, being dried for fuel (called *kizyak*). Acres of land were covered by these curious objects.

Out beyond this began the *polye* or field—the arable land of the village. No hedges, nothing to

catch the eye ; a vast space, difficult to measure with the eyes, of short green corn.

And beyond the *polye*—but out of sight of the village—stretched the interminable steppe across which I had come.

The hectic fervours of Petrograd, the stern responsibilities of Moscow—all alike were far behind and far away. All was quiet, peaceful, slow-moving, long-remembering. This was, outwardly at any rate, the old Russia, the Russia that has endured, and still endures.

CHAPTER II

My Host—His House—His Family—His Live Stock

I MUST now add a word or two about my arrival the night before, and the quarters in which I found myself.

My Russian was sadly defective, and though I have a knack of picking up a good deal of a language while living with the people and hearing it all day long, I was anxious to secure a Russian companion who could speak a little English. I found one at Samara in the shape of my friend Petrov, an employee in the telegraph service. He proved invaluable, and all my notes, especially on detailed or technical questions, were carefully checked with his assistance.

Petrov and I had been foisted at 11 p.m. upon our destined host, who might well, I thought, have met us with glum looks. Far from it.

"We are truly pleased to receive you," he said in grave and deliberate tones, after we had exchanged the usual salutations. "But I am not worthy of this cigar." (I had just presented him with my last.)

Eggs were produced in quantities; bread of a superior kind to that of Moscow; and actually—a thing not seen since leaving Esthonia—butter. The *samovar* was set going, and tea and conversation wound up the evening.

"And now," said he, "would you prefer to sleep on the bed or on the floor? The bed is a good bed, but it is not without parasites." Nor, as it happened, was the floor, which I chose in preference. But I was much too tired to mind.

In the morning I had time to take in the domestic arrangements. There was one biggish living-room, with two or three benches along the wall, and two small tables. At one of these, placed in the corner, where the *eikon* was hung with a tiny candle before it, we had our meals. This corner was the place of honour. It contained also a shelf, where stood the Bible and a collection of agricultural pamphlets.

Out of this room, towards the back, opened two tiny bedrooms. I tried one the second night, but the vast pile of sheep skins and miscellaneous clothing, which served as a mattress, harboured more animal life than was pleasant; and I moved out after this on to a sort of raised veranda along the back of the house, where there was just room to lie. Early on the first morning the family pig invaded my retreat by climbing the steps. He was far more astonished to see me than I was to see him. After that I barricaded the steps against him and slept in perfect comfort.

My host's name was Alexander Petrovich Emilianov. He was of the "middle" (*sredni*) type of peasant, which formed the great majority of the village. About one-fifth of its people were considered "poor" peasants. Of "rich" peasants there were only four or five, I was told.

Tall, upstanding and vigorous, with short, brown beard, in a much-worn cloth suit and top-boots Emilianov reminded me of a Scots gamekeeper in

East Lothian, one of my earliest and best friends. I soon found that he was a man of shrewd intelligence. He could read with ease. At church, which I attended on the following Sunday, it was his function to read the Epistle ; he stepped out from the standing crowd and read it in a loud and sonorous voice, facing the priest (who had just read the Gospel). He was evidently well versed in the Bible, and could hold his own in theological argument.

I could always rely on him for a well-balanced opinion on matters agricultural or political. His kindly and courteous manners were combined with a certain dignity and reserve. He never obtruded himself, even in his own house, when others were talking.

Emilianov's wife, Maria by name, was hospitality itself. She did not share in our meals, and only rarely in the conversation at other times. But she hovered round, wreathed in smiles. She was usually in the kitchen, but appeared to be equally at home when shearing the sheep. She had an odd, husky voice, the result of some affection of the throat, and as we ate she purred over us like a fat old cat, whispering "*kushaite, kushaite*"—"eat, eat." She plied us with pancakes, sour milk, cheese, cabbage soup, fish from the neighbouring lake, eggs, and occasionally even meat. I was in clover. We all ate our food out of one iron pot, just as it came from the stove. We each dipped our big, painted wooden spoon in it—the kind of spoons they sell in London as curiosities.

The family at home consisted of two little girls of ten and five, Lyonushka and Dunka (familiar forms of Helen and Eudoxia), who lived in a perpetual state

of suppressed laughter at my strange behaviour, and Nikola, a small and solemn little boy of four or thereabouts. They were all most affectionate to their mother, and I never saw her correct them. She was variously addressed as "Mamushka," "Mamush," or more familiarly, "Mam." Then there was a married daughter living close by. There was also a son, Serji, away at Archangel, where he had been fighting the English. But no one cared or thought much about whom he was fighting against; the thing had long ago become too confusing to follow. In face of the great contortion of events outside, the village was simply puzzled.

To complete my picture of Emilianov's home I should certainly add the live stock. It consisted of five "horses" (weedy little ponies of about fourteen hands), three cows, six sheep, and a few pigs, geese and chickens. There were also two dogs.

CHAPTER III

Emilianov's Land—The Drop in Cultivation— Reasons for it

My first preoccupation was, of course, to find out everything about the land. With this in view, I asked Emilianov to show me his own land, to which he readily assented, though somewhat amused that I should wish to go many miles to see three strips which had nothing to distinguish them from any others. So next morning his four-wheeled cart was made ready, a pile of sheepskins and a large sack of hay being arranged as a seat for Petrov and me. Very acceptable they were, for the bumping was terrific and the distance considerable. In fact, allowing for our long pauses for conversation and discussion, and a meal on the grass, the expedition occupied the greater part of the day.

He had three strips—one of wheat, one of rye and one of millet. The other crops grown on a smaller scale in the neighbourhood were sunflower (from whose seed a kind of butter is made) and water melon. The allocation of the strips had been decided, he told me, by drawing lots. Each strip was situated in the field or *polye* devoted to that particular crop. The system of strips is meant to secure that each holder gets both good and bad

land. The word for "land distribution" means literally "shredding" (*polosovanye*).

We must have driven ten miles or so in all. The land of the village consists of no less than 22,000 acres (9,000 *desiatin*). But of this only one-third is ploughed and sown each year; the rest lies fallow. This is the "three-field" system. And what is ploughed is merely scratched. The yield is trivial compared with that of more advanced countries. Between the villages lie vast tracts of virgin soil, much of it as good as that which is cultivated.

I now had my first ocular demonstration of the way in which agriculture has suffered from the disasters which have overtaken Russia. There had been a sharp fall in the amount of land ploughed and sown for the harvest. Of the 7,000 acres which would normally have been cultivated, only about 2,200 had been ploughed up for this year—a fact of ominous significance for the whole of Russia.

I asked Emilianov the reason. He replied that it was due above all to the mobilisation of horses and carts for transporting supplies, both for the civil population and for the army. This, I found, was the almost invariable explanation. It was this, he said, which had caused his neighbour to sow only twelve acres instead of thirty-five. Another reason given was that so many ploughs, drills, and reapers-and-binders had gone out of repair, and could neither be mended nor replaced.

I was particularly interested in the question whether the amount or uncertainty of the Government's food requisitions had helped to cause the reduction in the area ploughed and sown, and I put

the question to a number of different people. To my surprise, no one seemed to attach importance to this point. They would not admit that there had been any *voluntary* reduction. "Not enough horses, not enough ploughs"—to that we always returned. "Horses are dying out," said one, at the end of a long conversation. It was his way of conceiving the final disaster.

We drove on and on, my astonishment increasing with every mile at the strangely uneconomic character of this system, if system it could be called, of agriculture. The poor little pony struggled through one dry creek after another—water courses only during the weeks when the snow is melting, and for the rest of the year mere obstructions to traffic—till my bones ached again.

The air was brilliantly clear ; you saw some landmark, a grove of poplars perhaps in a hollow, which looked a mile off, and found it took over an hour to reach it. Great hawks—kites, I think—floated over us, and on the wilder parts we put up a curlew or two. Otherwise, save for the crows (hooded or black), there was hardly any animal life—except, indeed, the innumerable grasshoppers, whose song formed a continuous pedal accompaniment to all other sounds.

Before the Revolution my host had had eight acres—about the average holding in that region. He had now no less than eighty-five. This was the tremendous fact that I had turned over and over in my mind as we bumped along. Tremendous, surely ; for my host's case was a type, not only of thousands, but of millions of others. How came Emilianov to have ten times as many acres as

before? Of what nature was the convulsion which had resulted in this immense change, with all the human and social consequences which it must of necessity have carried with it?

Most of my questions turned on this point, as may well be imagined.

CHAPTER IV

How the Landlords disappeared from Ozero

"Look there," said Emilianov, pointing out from the edge of the village field over the limitless rolling steppe. "All that was the land of the landlords (*barin*). You may drive forty *versts* in a straight line from here and see nothing else." I came to realise that, in effect, the villages and their "fields," large as they seemed, were but islands in an ocean of large properties. On all sides they had been hemmed in by the estates of the great landlords.

"Who owned all this land?" I asked.

"All sorts of landlords. One was a Cossack. Two were Samara merchants. One was a German, Schmidt, who bought his from the Crown. Some was held by the Monks. One was an estate of Maria Feodorovna, the Tsaritsa."

"What has happened to them?"

"They are mostly gone," he replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "Some are in Samara. Most of them have left Russia, I suppose."

He showed some hesitation at first in telling me the details. But as we got to know each other better he became more communicative, and I was able gradually to piece together two stories of individual cases. I may add at this point that many of the things he told me, particularly with regard to dates and figures, have been very definitely confirmed by

subsequent inquiries which I have been able to make. Here is the first story :—

A Cossack landlord owned some 4,500 acres. The first trouble came in 1917, under the Kerenski *régime*. The Revolution had taken place in March. By the middle of the year, deserters from the Army were streaming over the country in all directions, generally carrying their rifles with them. A party of such soldiers, returning from the front, demanded a part of his land, and also a sufficient quantity of seed to sow it. He refused, but offered to sell them the seed at 5 roubles 15 copecks the bushel. They were angry, and told him that if he did not give it them they would take it themselves. He went to Pugachev, the chief town of the district (*uyezd*), and prevailed upon the military authorities there to send a detachment of soldiers to Ozero. These soldiers seized upon a poor peasant and placed him under a guard. The villagers came in a crowd, freed the prisoner, took away the arms, and arrested the soldiers themselves. Their officer was afraid, ran away back to Pugachev and returned with a fresh section of soldiers, whom he tried to infuriate by telling them that three of their comrades had been killed by the people in Ozero. On arrival, however, they found that this was a lie, and went over to the side of the villagers. The landlord had said, "This seed is neither yours nor mine." The villagers placed an ominous interpretation on this remark. They said among themselves, "He means to burn it," and acting upon this supposition, or excuse, they said, "Give us the keys, we shall go and take it." He gave up the keys, and they went and began to divide up the seed. After this the landlord fled.

Matters remained thus for some time. The villagers divided certain portions of the land for sowing, but the rest remained deserted. Neither the landlord nor his manager ever returned. The peasants discussed the matter, and came to the conclusion that they had better divide up the whole estate. They had meant to take only a part of it, and to leave the remainder to him. They now divided up not only the land, but all the stock and the stores. Finally they pulled down the house and carried off the materials in every direction.

This was in August, 1917. The landlord had ploughed and sowed and prepared the ground, but the peasants reaped his harvest that year.

The second story was even more interesting to me, because I was able to test it from personal intercourse with the "victim." Fevron was an elderly man who, in earlier life, had occupied most of his time as a merchant, trading between Turkestan and European Russia. He told me he had bought over 100 camels in Turkestan in former times. At that time the camels averaged 100 roubles apiece. They were now worth 140,000 roubles. With the profits of his trading he had bought 500 acres of land. His stock then consisted of twenty camels, twenty horses, fifty sheep and twenty cows. He had a large comfortable house, conspicuously situated near the centre of the main street, with a flight of half a dozen wooden steps leading up to the door, and a garden, or *sad*, in front. (Gardens in our sense are unknown, but a garden of half a dozen little trees, planted for ornament, is a noteworthy possession.)

In the summer of 1917 some of the villagers came to him and said that he had got to give up his land.

He argued and bargained with them, saying that he was prepared to give up some of it. The result was that he had to give up some of it that time, and more of it after the October Revolution.

He has now only forty-five acres instead of 500, and instead of twenty camels, only four. These he showed me, as they lay on the straw placidly chewing the cud, in a farm yard far too large for his needs. He spoke with affectionate regret of the patriarchal possessions which he had lost.

He was truly a patriarch. I was unable to reckon up his family accurately, but there was quite a considerable number of married sons and daughters living in the house, with large families of their own. The old man had a fat face, a slow but genial smile, a very dark complexion and a flowing beard. When he sat at the top of his outside steps, ready to converse with anybody who came along, he reminded me of the pictures of old Paul Kruger, sitting on the *stoep* in front of his Presidential dwelling at Pretoria.

Fevron has thus earned the reward of being obliging and compromising at the critical moment. He has, as I have said, a little land left and he continues to live in his house, which is by far the nicest in the village. He could not be allowed, however, to keep this house entirely to himself. His big parlour has been turned into the local Communist Club, while a small adjoining room has become the office of the Military Commissar.

I had several talks with him, and learnt from him many interesting facts. We had dinner one day at one end of his parlour, while two or three youthful members of the local Communist Party, looking rather awkward and uncomfortable, sat at the other

end, and we could see the Military Commissar scribbling away at his table through the half-open door of the other room.

Outwardly, Fevron was on quite good terms with these people, and gave them a friendly nod when they passed, but speaking to me in low tones, so that they could not hear, he described them in much less flattering terms. He would often contrast the anarchy of to-day, as he called it, with the *régime* which immediately preceded it. I should say he had been a member of the Cadet Party, though he did not tell me so. In spite of the fact that his troubles had begun during the Kerenski period, he was loud in his praises of the improvements that had been made at that time. The Zemstvos (councils for large rural areas, elected on a property franchise) had done wonders between February and October, 1917, both in organising co-operation, and in promoting new schools. I myself saw some evidences of their activity in the books which I occasionally saw in Soviet houses, bearing the stamp, "Zemstvo Public Library."

CHAPTER V

How the Land was distributed in Ozero

THE landlords' land was seized in Ozero in the summer of 1917—that is, during the Kerenski *régime*, and before the Communists came into power. I was told afterwards that by October of that year there was not a single great estate left in the Samara "Government." But it appears that the formal allocation of the land did not take place until after the October (*i.e.*, Communist) Revolution. With the land, the stock and implements (*inventar*) were distributed also.

The Soviet of the *Uyezd*, Pugachev, allotted a certain quantity of land to each village in its area, Ozero among others. The Soviet of Ozero was specially elected for the purpose of dividing up the land, all the villagers having the right to vote. The Soviet then distributed the land according to an absolutely fixed principle, namely, five *desiatin* per "soul." No one was to have more than he and his family could work. Emilianov's family, including wife and children, amounted to seven, and that is why he had thirty-five *desiatin*, or, approximately, eighty acres. Appeals could be made to the Volost (or District) Soviet, and on one occasion I heard such an appeal being tried.

"And what do the peasants think of it all now?" I asked Emilianov.

"It's a fine thing, the Revolution. Every one is in favour of it. They don't like the Communist Party, but they like the Revolution."

"Why don't they like the Communist Party?"

"Because they are always worrying us. They are people from the towns and don't understand the country. Commissars—powerful persons—are continually coming. We don't know what to do with them. New orders (*prikazi*) are always coming out. People are puzzled. As soon as you understand one of them, a different one comes along."

"What party do most people belong to here?"

"None at all. They are non-party (*bezpartini*)."

"Do they think the land is really their own now?"

"They look on their holdings as their own private property, to do what they like with. When the father dies, the son takes it."

"But the Soviet Constitution says that all the land of Russia belongs to all the people of Russia."

"Yes, but the peasants don't know that. Anyhow, they take no account of it."

"I thought the village land was all managed by the Mir. What has become of the Mir?"

"What is the Mir?" asked Emilianov in return.

This was a shock to me. I had read in many books of this ancient village council, as one of the central facts of Russian life. Could it be that Emilianov had never heard of it?

"I thought it was an old council which managed the land of the village," I explained stumblingly.

"Ah, you mean the *staretzi* (elders)," he replied.

"Oh yes, but that was in the old days. They managed the land once, and very badly too. They

were a lot of foolish old fellows. But they were abolished long ago."

I also learned from Emilianov that until a few years ago the village used to have what was called the "Community's Portion," which was cultivated in common. This was given up before the Revolution, because people found it inconvenient to leave work on their own holdings. Some common store was necessary, because there were contributions to be made to the poor ; there were the general expenses of the village government, and it was a custom to keep a reserve of grain against famine. These purposes, however, were provided for by collecting something from each individual for the public needs and storing it in the village barn, which held, he told me, 40,000 poods.

The Government had recommended a revival of the former system under the name of "Soviet Strips." The villages, however, would not hear of it, thinking it was some "Communistic affair."

"Well," I said, "the people have got the land now, and they've got it the way they like best."

"Yes."

"But tell me—do they think all this is going to last ? Do they think the land will always be divided as it is now ? "

"Yes, most of them do."

"And do you think so ? "

Emilianov scratched his head. "Who knows ? " he said doubtfully. "No, I do not think so. This is certainly not the final arrangement."

CHAPTER VI

The Rival Schools—Social Revolutionaries and Communists

ALL these things came to me first as isolated facts, but as I listened to them, one after another, they began to piece themselves together. Little by little the picture began to clear itself and the outlines to be filled in.

The Land Revolution—from the peasants' point of view—began to live before my eyes. And beyond that, back and back into earlier times, I seemed to see the long melancholy story of the struggle of the peasant and the lord (*barin*). I recalled what I had heard or read of the half-legendary figure of Stenka Razin, outlaw in the eyes of the landlord, hero in the eyes of the peasant—a sort of eighteenth century Robin Hood; of the local risings, the murders of landlords, during the period of serfdom; of the emancipation of the serfs in 1861—by no means an unmixed benefit, since it was followed by widespread enclosures of land, recalling the story of the village labourer in our own country; then of the various efforts at reform in recent times; of the agricultural strikes, and their savage repression; of the Social Revolutionary Party, which played so ingeniously upon the old local patriotism of the villages, while grafting upon it the phraseology of modern Socialism;

and finally the climax of 1917 and 1918, in which the pent-up flood burst out at last.

A great and prolonged controversy took place as to the manner in which the confiscated lands should be disposed of. I had an interesting conversation on this point with the Military Commissar of another village, Pyestravka. He told me that the dispute was between "Socialisation" and "Nationalisation." The Social Revolutionaries wanted the former, meaning by it the acquisition by the village (or the "Commune," as they call it) of all the land taken from the landlords, without any terms being made with the Central Government. Each Commune was to decide on its own methods of taking over the land, of distributing it, and of working it. Their ideal was the "free labour Commune," and they believed in "spontaneous" action.

The Communists, on the other hand, according to my informant, wanted "Nationalisation." They saw that the supply of food to the towns was a question of life and death for the Revolution. They realised that the country could starve the revolutionary town population into submission, unless the latter took drastic measures to protect itself. Hence, they believed in Soviet farms, established on the best cultivated farms of the old landlords, and worked like State factories by the Central Government. These were to serve also to educate the peasants in scientific methods. They believed in large scale as opposed to small scale agriculture. They believed in agricultural communes and other co-operative institutions, which should receive machinery and other necessities in return for specified food contributions, and generally, in assert-

ing and maintaining the right of the Central Government to have its say in agricultural affairs. On a smaller scale they advocated "Soviet strips" (*polosa*) in every village, for the growing of food for the towns. As to the division of the land at so much per "soul," where was the fairness in allowing the village to do this when the population was always changing and new immigrants coming in?

CHAPTER VII

The " Committee of Poverty "—How the Class Struggle began in Ozero

AFTER the land distribution in the summer of 1918 came an episode in the history of the village upon which, I confess, I am not quite clear. I am inclined to think that I came here upon a point on which my friend Emilianov was not an impartial witness. This was the so-called " Committee of Poverty " (*byednota*) or " Committee of the Poorer Peasantry."

A decree was issued, said he, in June, 1918, to the effect that the Soviet should be formed of " poor " peasants, who should, in addition to the ordinary functions of the Soviet, see to the collection of the food requisitions for the towns. There were special requisitions at that time on the rich peasants. The object was that the Soviet might not be dominated by these " rich " peasants. A meeting of all the village was called, at which the chairman read out a list of candidates for the " Committee of Poverty." People who wished to be elected had written their names in this list. Each name, as it was read, was discussed, and several candidates were rejected as not being " poor." The voting was by a show of hands. About forty were elected, with a " presidium " of three, the President being Chetvergov (the same man who was, at the time of my visit, the

President of the Soviet). The Committee went on for a while, but it "did not understand its duties." After a few months (November, 1918) it was dissolved. The ordinary Soviet took its place once more.

Such was Emilianov's story. He was somewhat reticent about it. I had to pump him a good deal. He spoke of this Committee with a contempt which was not habitual to him.

But there was a background to all this, as I learned from other inquiries.

In the summer of 1918, owing to the counter-revolutionary movements and the foreign invasions, the Republic was faced with a crisis. It was a matter of life and death for the Soviet Government to obtain food for the urban population. The available corn reserve was in the hands of the "rich" and "middle" peasants, and they were withholding it. What was to be done? The solution adopted was (broadly speaking) to appeal, against these elements, to the "proletarian" section in each village—the "poor" peasants.

I regret that I did not learn more about this class. I visited two or three of them in their houses, which were mostly of one room and built of mud bricks. I did so in company with Emilianov. His attitude towards them (though they seemed to be friendly enough) was still that of a kindly superior—like that of a tenant farmer visiting a labourer.

Hitherto, I presume, the class division had been between the villagers as a whole and the landlords as a whole. Now came a class division within the village itself—"poor" peasants on one side, "rich" and "middle" peasants on the other.

The Social Revolutionaries, who seem to have been the dominant party in the Samara "Government" at that time, favoured a policy which regarded the interests of all villagers as broadly identical. They were, therefore, opposed to the "Committees of Poverty."

The Communists, on the other hand, contended that this would in effect establish the middle peasantry as a rural *bourgeoisie*; that private property would be entrenched more firmly than ever; that the "rich" and "middle" peasants would exploit the "poor" peasants; and, worst of all, that grain would not be obtainable for the towns except on extortioners' terms. It was only the "poor" peasants, they contended, who had a real common interest and common feeling with the proletariat of the towns.

CHAPTER VIII

*My Visitors—The Molokani—One hundred and five
Years old—The Kirghiz Horse-herd—The Charm
of the Peasant*

As soon as my presence in the village became known I found myself the centre of a considerable amount of interest. One or two visitors dropped in the second day, and on the succeeding days they came in twos and threes. I need not have stirred out of doors. I held, in fact, a kind of court in Emilianov's big room.

No one knew why I had come there. My own explanation—that I had come to see for myself how people were living in Russia—was obviously impossible of credence. That a man should journey to Russia, travel three days down the Volga, drive two days, without stopping, across the steppe, and settle down for a week in Ozero, for no other purpose than to see how Ozero folk lived—no, that would not do. But though they evidently thought thus, they were much too polite to say so. Nor did they appear to care very much. They were just interested in the fact that a man from England, for some reason best known to himself, had come here and was on show.

The most flattering welcome I received was from a man who travelled some six miles from a neighbouring village.

“ Why did you come ? ” I said.

“ I came,” said he, with the sweetest smile on his much bearded and bewhiskered face, “ because there is a text which says, ‘ when you hear of a wise man, run and knock at his door.’ ”

This man was a Baptist, or “ Spiritual Christian.” Quite a number of different sects are represented in the Samara Government.

It was curious how often our conversations ended in some kind of theological discussion. I remember a conversation with Emilianov and two other peasants which began with the shortage of steam tractors, and ended with the question whether other children were born to Mary after Jesus. Religion in one form or another seemed to be constantly in the thoughts of these peasants. I myself was primarily interested in politics, but in spite of my efforts to turn the conversation on to that subject, it was remarkable how often it got diverted after a short while in the direction mentioned.

While speaking of the sects I must mention that which interested me the most, namely, the Molokani. Nearly half the village belonged to this persuasion. Their services closely resemble those of the Quakers, and are called “ Meetings for Worship.” I attended one of them at mid-day on Sunday. A considerable part of the time was spent in silence, though there was also some reading of the Bible, one hymn and two or three extemporaneous addresses. It was my landlord friend, Fevron, who took me to the meeting, being a member of the sect. I sat by his side at the head of a long table. There was something not quite democratic about this arrangement, and I suspected that his position as a landlord, though ignored by

the State, had not been quite forgotten by his religious community.

He told me that the sect was founded about 1780, and was greatly persecuted in the early days. The authorities used to take the children of the Molokani by force and put them into the monasteries. During the War many of the Molokani had been, he said, conscientious objectors. Two of his sons were let off from military service during the War; one was teaching, the other doing hospital work. It was only, however, since the Revolution that a definite decree on the subject of conscientious objectors had been passed, relieving those from service who could show that they held anti-militarist opinions before the War.

Fevron also took me to see a most remarkable old man called Rodion, also a Molokani, who was said to be 105 years old. He was apparently quite healthy, and his hearing, at least, was perfect. He was dressed in a long white coat and top-boots, and lived as the patriarchal head of a great family house, peopled by his various descendants—much as Fevron's was, but on an even larger scale. When I was introduced to him, he at once began by saying, "You may think you are a stranger here; but you are not. We are all sons of one Father." He begged me to take back a message of love and greeting to the Quakers. "We all know about the Quakers here," he said; "Quakers always tell the truth. They are also friendly to Russia."

I should, perhaps, add here that in the Volga district there is a great mixture of races as well as of religions. On my way through other villages, in the "Governments" of Simbirsk and Kazan particularly,

I saw not only Tartars and Bashkirs and Mordvas, but also Chuvashchi and Cheremishchi, parts of the same race to which belong the Finns in the North and the Bulgars in the South. In Ozero itself, as far as I remember, I only met one man of alien race. He was a Kirghiz from the Asiatic steppes. His occupation, I was told, was that of a "horse-herd"; he was employed to look after great droves of horses sent out to graze, and he lived for weeks with them, alone in the wilds. He certainly looked as if he was always in the saddle; he was very short, and waddled rather than walked. As to features, he was the most Mongolian Mongol I ever saw; while his complexion was as dark as that of a Red Indian. The sweat always stood out in beads all over his face, and he looked as if washing was not much in his line. These peculiarities made it the more remarkable that my friend Emilianov appeared to feel no sort of race prejudice about him. I remember the two squatting side by side on the floor of the little veranda where I used to sleep, with their backs against the wall, smoking one cigarette after another, and conversing on terms of perfect equality.

I should, perhaps, become tedious if I were to describe many of my conversations. Yet there was nothing which made me feel more vividly that I was having a glimpse into the soul of these people, so different from any with whom I had ever had intercourse before. In a sense, they were simplicity itself. Few of them could read or write. They heard little of the outside world, for a newspaper only rarely reached the village. Yet they were far indeed from stupid. They were great lovers of argument, and by no means deficient in the

art. Their observations were always practical and shrewd.

And with all this there was nothing harsh about them, but a singular sweetness of temperament. It showed itself not only in their courtesy to the stranger, but in the harmony which, as far as I was able to judge, existed among members of the same family, and in their remarkable kindness to one another.

If there is a spring of savage cruelty which breaks out in times of excitement, there is also a readiness to help others and share with others, which far surpasses the cold and nicely calculated charity of Western peoples.

It would be absurd in me, after so short an experience, to try to sum up the philosophy of the Volga peasant. It remains a closed book to me. Only I could feel an undercurrent of sadness in their natures, which may spring (as some writers tell us) from a pessimism more real and deep than we in the West can easily imagine.

How strange is the fact that, in their language, the word for "harvest" should be *strada*, "suffering"! It has, surely, a certain significance. The thoughts of these people, generation after generation, have turned on the hard, grinding labour of harvest-time—not as ours do, on the joy of the garnering, the "harvest-home."

In the village street of Ozero in the warm summer nights there were usually three or four groups collected at different points with their *balalaikas* (a sort of mandolin), alternately singing and conversing. Suddenly a terrific quarrel would arise. Ugly, discordant, angry voices would rend the air,

and it was difficult to believe they were not coming to blows. This would continue for five or ten minutes, perhaps.

Then it would suddenly subside, and a brief pause follow. Then, through the darkness, the *balalaikas* would begin tinkling again.

CHAPTER IX

"No Petrol, no Matches, no Grease"—A Prophecy of coming Famine—Agricultural Communes—Are they Godless?—Emilianov's Opinion

I WELL remember an old man who had fought in the Russo-Turkish War in 1878. His name was Daniel Efimovich Sazonov. He dwelt much on the misery caused by the War—which to him meant, not only the Great War as we understand it, but the various prolongations of it up to the very time at which he was speaking. "Every one I meet," said he, "speaks to me of sons and brothers far away—in Poland, in Germany, in Finland, on the frontiers everywhere. Then we have to cultivate extra land for the families of the soldiers who are fighting.

"Still, God was good to my son. He was a prisoner in England. The English treated him splendidly; he had never had so much to eat."

I asked him how things were going in Ozero.

"There is no petrol, there are no matches, there is no grease," he replied.

"But you have the land," I said.

"Yes, it is true, but you cannot make much for yourself. Our Soviet is always taking things from us. If it does not take things it compels us to turn out with our carts and transport something or other. The discontent is worse this year than last.

"Besides this, times are bad, and they are going

to be worse. Famine is coming. There is a prophecy in Ezekiel which says, 'I will make my earth as stone.' Now that is coming true. The earth this year is not friable as it was ; it is getting like stone. It will be very bad for the rye. It will not bear " (*ne rodit*).

Our conversation drifted on to the question of "Communes," that is, the Agricultural Communes which the Soviet Government was so anxious to establish. "People are afraid of them," he said, "they do not understand them. They think they are against God. The reason is that the Communist Party is against God, and they think that the Communes have something to do with the Communist Party.

"It is true that Communists tell people not to go to the Church. This is a great mistake. It is like taking away a little child from the breast. They take away all support from the priests, and these have to be supported by the congregations, and that is hard enough. The sects here, even they are helping to support the poor old popes, because they think it is right. In old days the sects themselves were persecuted just in the same way by the Church.

"The Communists go too fast. The people are confused in their minds. They want the people to go forward, and yet they frighten them back. You might as well beat a horse and hold him back at the same time.

"Of course I know," he said, "that what the people say is not true. The Communes have nothing to do with religion. They are good enough if they work. But they are very difficult to work. There is one about twenty *versts* from here. They have two

steam tractors there. But the people are always quarrelling. One says to another, ‘ Whose spade is this ? ’ The other says, ‘ I do not know whom it belongs to. ’ Each one complains because his neighbour is idle. An Artel is very much better than a Commune. There, people have some property of their own, though they have to work together as well.”

Emilianov held a more favourable view of the Agricultural Communes than this. “ The old man was quite right,” he said. “ The people think the Communes are against religion. That is ridiculous. Communes are very good things.”

“ What is the advantage of them ? ” I asked.

“ The present system of each man having several long strips is a bad one. If one man lets his strip lie fallow it begins to harbour marmots, and that does harm to all his neighbours. In the Pyestravka field (*polye*) there are many fallow strips. They will spoil the whole harvest. This would never happen in a Commune. If people are not intelligent enough to work a Commune they should start a working Artel (*trudovaya Artel*). Some day people will do this. They will go out and build a new village, and live nearer to their work.”

CHAPTER X

Communists—The Military Commissar—The Communist Party in Ozero—Kolchak or the Soviet Government—The Peasants' Choice

THE old man above alluded to was very sore on the subject of Communists—especially the local variety.

"Are many of the peasants Communists?" I asked him.

"Communists," he said, "Communists, indeed! When they had their little scraps of land that were not enough to live on, and had to rent a lot of land from the landlords, they were fine Communists then! Practical Communists! Now they have got it, they are so no longer. They are good enough Communists when there are things to be taken—something to get.

"No," he added reflectively, "if all people were true Communists, it would be well. A true Communist is one who gives his coat to another. Our Communists call you 'Comrade,' but they are mostly Communists in word, not in act. They say we are all equal, but somehow we are not equal. What do you think of men like our policeman? He beat a little boy the other day for some tiny fault or other. A pretty sort of Communist!"

I hardly felt this was a complete account of the matter, and I made it my business to cultivate the

acquaintance of the official representative of the dominant party—the Military Commissar. I had met him first in Fevron's house, a room in which, as I have said, had been requisitioned for his office. The normal organ of local government is, of course, the Village Soviet, but it appears that the Military Commissar had, at the time I was there, extremely wide powers, and could certainly override the Soviet's decisions in some respects.

This conflict of authorities does not sound so strange to the ears of a Russian as to those of an Englishman. We habitually make the assumption that each authority must have a distinct sphere of competence, not overlapping with that of any other. This, however, is by no means the assumption in Russia. It is quite possible for two authorities to have powers which overlap, and the question of which is to prevail in the last resort is often one to which there is no precise answer. It should be remembered, in connexion with the powers of the Military Commissar, that the Samara district was still under special military control, having been the scene of heavy fighting in 1918–1919, with Czechs, with Kolchak, and with marauding Cossacks.

The Military Commissar, Karebkin by name, was a comparatively young man, with a fresh clean-shaven face, and a bearing at once soldierly and modest. He was a native of the village, and was the fortunate possessor of a garden or *sad* with many fruit-trees. His father had planted this, and being a man of enterprise, had also made a raised aqueduct of wood, furnished with a pump, to bring water from the neighbouring lake. Karebkin invited me one day to have tea with him and two young Com-

munist friends, in the garden, of which he was justly proud. We sat in a sort of cart-shed, open on one side. We were surrounded by a dense cloud of gnats and mosquitoes, but he gave me plenty of cigarettes made of what they called *machorka*—a vegetable which bears little resemblance to tobacco, but is pungent enough to keep the gnats at bay.

Karebkin told me of his various functions. He was appointed by the military authorities, and controlled all military affairs, mobilisation, desertion, support of soldiers' families, accounts, purchase of horses, etc.

But his functions were much wider. He had also the "political oversight" of all the district (*volost*), of which Ozero forms part. He was the local organiser of the Communist Party. In this capacity he arranged the plays and entertainments which formed part of their propaganda. (I was much struck by the ingenuity of the amateur theatres in several villages.) In addition, he was Chairman of the Commission for fighting epidemics.

Lastly, he had a voice in the distribution of the land. The Soviet carried it out in the first instance, but he was supposed to know the Constitution, and the decrees concerning it; if the Soviet, in his opinion, did not act in accordance with these, he could suggest alterations, and if they were rejected could refer the matter to the Soviet of the County (*uyezd*).

Karebkin told me that in Ozero there were seven full members of the Communist Party. One of these was the priest's daughter. All the Soviet members, except the President, were "non-party."

It struck me that the Communists were a little

group of active propagandists. They regarded themselves as the leaven in a great inert lump, and freely admitted the difficulty of their task. They seemed to be doing a good deal to bring life into the village.

Karebkin himself struck me, not only as moderate in his opinions, but as a man of some tact and judgement. Of all the individuals I saw at Ozero he was the one whom it was most easy to understand and to be understood by. He was certainly more Western in his outlook than the rest.

The Military Commissar in another village was much more flamboyant than Karebkin. "We have a magnificent programme in our schools," he said. "We have a Communist Club with thirty-four members. We have a Young Communists' League with forty members. Our cause is going forward."

The general attitude of the peasants, so far as I could judge, was that they owed much to the Soviet Government in the matter of the land; they approved of the "principle of everybody being equal"; they often talked of the "true" Communist as being an ideal sort of person. But they complained bitterly of the absence of necessities, of the compulsory contributions, and the worry of perpetual orders and appeals, often hard to understand. They considered that the Government was responsible for all these evils alike, and that the peasant was somehow in a position of inferiority to the townsman.

And yet, in spite of all these complaints, when the opportunity was offered them to choose between Kolchak on the one side and the Soviet Government on the other, the peasants do not seem to have had much hesitation.

They would not rise to help the "saviours" of Russia. This was the nearest approach to a declaration of democratic opinion on the part of the masses. It was conclusive. They were for the Revolution; and for the moment the Soviet power was the embodiment of the Revolution. They grumbled and cursed at it; but when the opportunity was offered to overthrow it, they said "No."

CHAPTER XI

The Shortage of Manufactured Goods—A Government Shop—In the Family Bath

I HAVE already mentioned the old man who summed up the evils of the time in the absence of petrol, matches and grease. This was typical of every conversation I had, with hardly a single exception. Now it was one sort of manufactured goods, now another. Now the shortage was attributed to one cause, and now to another. But the absence of various manufactured articles was the supreme grievance—a far greater grievance than any direct interference of the Government, though this, too, formed the subject of much complaint.

I learned to expect, at the beginning of almost every conversation, a long list of the articles which could not be obtained. The list varied according to the particular needs or occupation of the speaker. I had better give a comprehensive list at once. The articles most frequently mentioned were ploughs, scythes, wheels, tyres, nails; kerosene, paraffin, soap, grease, glass, cloth, boots and paper. Medical necessities were also often mentioned. The doctor at Ozero, I was told, "has nothing but his thermometer." There was a special grievance about salt, because the peasants said it could be obtained in Russia at no great distance (near Uralsk), and they ought to be allowed to go and get it.

The whole agricultural life of the village was hampered at every turn by the lack of these goods. Such goods as were available were supplied in Ozero through a Government shop. There had formerly been a Co-operative Store, called the "Self-Help Consumers' Society." This name was still retained, but the shop was, in fact, the Government shop. It was supplied, as far as it could be supplied at all, from the central shop of the "region" at Pyestravka, which in its turn was supplied by the central "Supply Committee" for the Samara "Government" or province.

By a decree of March, 1919, so I was told, every one had access to the store on equal terms, and shares were no longer taken up.

On one occasion I happened to be passing the shop when a new lot of supplies had just come in. It was packed with people as tight as it would hold, and there was an excited crowd outside. As each fortunate purchaser came out, he or she was surrounded by a group of enquirers, feverishly anxious to see what had been bought, and at what price. I saw people coming out with boots, shoes, whetstones for grinding, gloves for rough winter work, etc. Most of the articles, however, were things of lesser importance—cups, teapots, spoons, etc. Of the real necessities there were pathetically few.

That evening, after a hot day, it struck me that now was the time to sample the family bath.

I had supposed that the Russian peasant was dirty; but in Ozero, though he does not succeed in keeping his house clean, he certainly makes great efforts to keep his body so. Every house of any size has a little round mud hut at the far end of the

dvor, and in it are the fireplace and large pan which constitute the bath. Emilianov told me that most people wash once a week, if not twice ; and oftener if they are doing dirty work.

I asked him if I could use the bath. " With all my heart," he said, " but Maria (his wife) has been shearing the sheep to-day, and she is in it just now. But no matter ; my married daughter lives close by ; we will walk along there, and she will let you use hers."

The daughter's house was about 100 yards along the street, on the opposite side. The fire was alight already, and she ushered me to the door of the hut, giving me a second pan with cold water, which she put on the floor. Strangest of all, after apologising for having no soap, she gave me a tin pot containing about a quart of milk. " This is almost as good," she said. " Pour it over your head, and rub yourself with it."

The thought of thus wasting the precious liquid, for the want of which the babies in Moscow were pining away, seemed at first sight an outrage. I seemed to be indulging in a luxury as guilty as those of the later Roman Empire. But I soon reflected that there were no means of conveying it to Moscow, or even to Samara, and went ahead with my washing.

A large cauldron of water was simmering on the fire. At the side of it was a high shelf or seat, about 4 feet from the ground. It was insufferably hot. According to my instructions, I was to shut the door, throw plenty of water on the fire, climb up on to the seat, into the thickest of the steam, and there beat myself with a small birch rod to make myself hotter still. Had I attempted to carry out this

programme I doubt if I should have lived to tell the tale. I did not. I remained below, and left the door ajar. Emilianov's daughter hovered about in attendance, without the prudery of pretending that she did not see what was going on, but with perfect naturalness and ease.

CHAPTER XII

The Food Requisition—"Why don't you pay up?"

I HAVE mentioned above that the interferences of the Government aroused much murmuring. The chief of these, of course, was the direct levying by the Government of contributions in kind—assessed (in theory) according to the surplus (*islishek*) left over after the peasants' own needs were met.

In Ozero that year contributions of produce and services for the needs of the State had been made as follows :—

(a) Compulsory contribution of grain for the civil population—36,000 poods ;¹

(b) Compulsory contribution of sheep and hay for the Army ;

(c) Voluntary contributions for various purposes ;

(d) Mobilisation of horses, carts and labour to transport the produce.

The amount of the compulsory contribution from each village was fixed by the "Regional Supply Committee" (*raionni prodovolstvenni komitet*) at Pyestravka, the chief town of the "region." The produce was collected by the Village Soviet. It had to be conveyed to Pyestravka (about fifteen miles), and sometimes as far as Samara (sixty miles). The

¹ A pood is just over 36 lbs.

total demand for grain was 50,000 poods—the amount actually contributed being somewhat less. A new demand had recently been made for the whole remaining stock of grain, leaving only three poods per head until the next harvest. Payment was made at fixed prices : wheat, 44 to 49 roubles per pood ; rye, 34 roubles per pood ; hay, 12 roubles per pood. (Horses were purchased direct by the military and paid for at market prices ; I myself saw prices ranging from 80,000 to 180,000 roubles being paid. An officer and some forty men had come over to do the buying, which I watched from the steps of Fevron's house.)

Villages which made their contributions completely and regularly were rewarded by preferential treatment in the matter of manufactured goods.

The Samara Government was one of the " bread-governments," *i.e.*, was expected to send away a large surplus, and this no doubt accounted for the exceptional demands made on it.

I often tried, in my small way, to put the point of view of the towns. " You have not seen the towns as I have," I said. " If you had seen how thin the people are there you would give up your corn readily."

" Yes, yes, we are ready to give," they would say. " When they come to us and ask us to give for the starving, we give. There was a Commissar here from Moscow not long ago. He had a meeting and made a speech. He appealed for the children. Everybody gave then."

" But all the townspeople, not only the children, are more hungry than you are."

" Yes, we know ; but they ask too much. It is

unreasonable. Besides, they always come at the wrong time."

"Well, you don't have to pay taxes, as you used to do."

"No, that is true. We should be very well off now if only we could sell our corn freely. If we could go and sell it where we liked, we should get big prices—not a wretched forty or fifty roubles, but thousands of roubles."

At Ozero there had been none of those conflicts with the military over the food collection, of which we used to hear so much in our newspapers. I was told, however, of one village in the neighbourhood where a disturbance had occurred, and several peasants had lost their lives. "It was a nasty business (*grazno*, dirty)," my informant added.¹

¹ In March, 1921, the "new economic policy" of the Soviet Government was inaugurated at the Tenth All-Russian Congress of Soviets. On April 7th a decree was promulgated which abolished the State monopoly of grain and other agricultural products, and instituted in its stead the "tax in kind." This tax is levied in the form of a comparatively low percentage of the products of each farm, intended to supply the needs of the Red Army and the workers in the towns. The percentage levied is graduated according to the size of the farm (small farms paying a relatively small percentage) and the number of people and live stock to be supported on it. The supplies remaining after the tax has been paid may be disposed of as the peasant pleases. In theory this "free trade" is confined to the limits of the "local agricultural district." The "tax in kind" is regarded as a provisional measure. Ultimately it is hoped that food will be obtained in a normal way in exchange for manufactured goods.

CHAPTER XIII

The Meeting of the Ozero Soviet—The Lost Receipt— The Soviet President

FORTUNATELY I was able to attend, one evening, a meeting of the Village Soviet. The experience was illuminating, as well as full of humour.

The great subject which was exercising the mind of the Soviet was the question of certain sheep which had been sent to Pugachev, the *Uyezd* town, as part of the last requisition claimed from the village of Ozero. The villagers said they had sent thirty-seven sheep in excess of the number demanded. A further requisition was now being made, and the authorities had not given credit for the thirty-seven previously sent in excess. A Commissar, their representative, had come to Ozero to argue the case with the local Soviet. He was evidently regarded with suspicion, not unmingled with fear. In the attitude of the village towards him I saw reflected the whole conflict between narrow village patriotism on the one hand, and a highly rational, but unsympathetic centralisation on the other.

The Soviet house was a one-storey building with three rooms, raised 3 or 4 feet above the ground, and approached by a flight of wooden steps. The handrails which flanked these steps were the chosen resort, whenever any interesting business was going

forward, of as many of the villagers as could possibly sit on them. There was animated discussion in progress as Petrov and I entered. But it was nothing to the excitement in the room where the meeting was.

There were benches along three of the walls, and on one of these we were squeezed in. At the table in a corner sat the President of the Soviet, with the Commissar on his left. The majority were standing. The room was packed and hot. The Commissar, cool and collected, with his satchel of documents, reminded me of a solicitor in a county court at home. His case was simple. "If you sent these sheep," he said, "you must have had a receipt. Produce it." Consternation and confusion followed. The receipt was not forthcoming. The President personally searched the drawers and the cupboard. Some said it had been lost; others that it had never been given.

A great debate thereupon arose. The general public were present, as well as the twenty-two members of the Soviet, and were allowed to speak. Almost every one had a turn, but order was, on the whole, maintained, and the discussion was practical and businesslike in the extreme. Proposition succeeded proposition, and amendment amendment. Some were for giving in and sending the full number of sheep demanded; some were for sending the number demanded, minus thirty-seven; some for sending a deputation to present the case of the village. The heat grew more intense, the smells more pungent. It neared 10 p.m. and I saw no prospect of the discussion finishing. I suggested to Petrov that we should slip out. He assented with a

sigh of relief, and the conclusion of the debate "remains conjectural to this hour."

A curious instance of the variety of the Soviet's functions occurred one day. I met the President hurrying round the village with a worried expression on his face. A Commissar had just arrived from the Commissariat of Public Health; his business was the collection of medicinal herbs! The President was busily engaged in searching for some refugees—presumably some of the great army of refugees from the Polish border, who were transplanted to the Volga region during the War—on the ground that these were the only people with nothing to do, and they might as well be employed in collecting the herbs.

The President, Chetvergov, was the type of man that one would expect from his story. He was short and broad, with red hair and beard, and a bullet head that was always thrust forward. He gave me the impression of being stupid, but obstinate when once his course was chosen. One could easily fancy him taking the orders of the authorities to "run" the Committee of Poverty, and doing it doggedly, according to his lights.

CHAPTER XIV

The Schoolmaster—The Priest—Tipping the Wrong Man

ONE day I had tea with the schoolmaster. The school is held in the principal room of his house, and recalled the English village school of 100 years ago, as depicted by George Morland and such-like painters. As it was summer, when no schooling goes on, the benches were piled up and filled about half the room. The chief object was the schoolmaster's baby, suspended in a kind of hammock with a string attached to one side of it, so that you could swing it from side to side without moving from your seat.

The schoolmaster, like every one else in the educational world, deplored the shortage of books, the shortage of equipment, the shortage of teachers. "How can you expect the children to come to me? I only get one hundred and sixty-five." (There must have been, I estimate, some 700 children of school age in the village.) "It is not good enough to attract them. Besides, most of them have no boots to come in."

But unlike the peasants, the schoolmaster did not blame the Government for the shortage of the things needed for his profession. "The Government's programme is very fine," he said, "but they put

little of it into practice. It is not because they will not, but because they cannot. They have to accept as teachers men and women without education."

"What about the old priest's school?"

"It was not much good, but it was better than nothing. I think it is a mistake of the Government to stop such schools. There used to be Zemstvo schools as well. They are stopped, too. There is only one kind now—those under the Commissariat of Public Instruction. All schools are called 'Labour Schools' now."

"Is schooling compulsory?"

"No, but it is going to be."

"When will the new programme come into force?"

"I don't know. The whole thing is a *kasha* (a kind of porridge, *i.e.*, a jumble). The staff here ought to be five; it is only two. There are less children coming now than last year. Still, there are more than there were before the Revolution."

"What about classes for adults?"

He smiled. "That is coming, too. It is all in the programme. There are plenty of such classes in the towns, but it is only a beginning, even there. Here there are none."

Walking back from the schoolmaster's house I met the priest or "pope." He was shuffling along the village street in the dust, with a rake over his shoulder. Except for a hat of somewhat peculiar "wide-awake" shape, I should not have distinguished him from a layman. He wore a long, light-coloured dust-coat, and the usual battered top boots. He was in fact coming back from his laborious day on his land, which he cultivates—since the Revolu-

tion—like any other peasant. He was a kindly, gentle old man, of the simplest peasant type.

He was afterwards good enough to visit me at Emilianov's. "I used in old days," he said, "to carry on the only school in the village, and I had nearly as many pupils as the schoolmaster has now. But the Soviet Government does not trust priests."

He seemed to be fairly liberal in his ideas of religion—a fact due, Emilianov told me, to the presence of so many "sectaries" in the neighbourhood—and perhaps to the fact, which I have already mentioned, that these "sectaries" have even helped the impoverished Orthodox priests in their distress. He encourages people to read the Bible, though very few do so except the Molokani.

I asked him what he thought of Tolstoy. He replied with some impatience, "I can't understand why people make such a fuss about him. All that he says is simply taken out of the Gospels."

Curiously enough, the daughter of the priest is one of the very few Communists in Ozero. She was away at the University at Samara, studying for the medical profession.

I must not forget, while speaking of the priest, to mention a little incident which took place in the church. I had wandered in early one morning, about 7 a.m., to see if anything was going on. I found a baby was being christened. The corner of the chapel which was used as the baptistery was very dark, and after the ceremony was over and we all began pushing our way out, a man beside me suddenly edged up to me in a rather nervous manner and pressed a whole sheaf of paper roubles into my hand. After a second's surprise I realised what had

happened. This was the fond father of the baby. He had mistaken me for the verger or some other functionary, on whom he wished to bestow a tip. I never before felt our common humanity in such a flash. "One touch of Nature makes the whole world kin."

CHAPTER XV

My "Arrest and Imprisonment"—An Unopened Letter—Farewell to the Emilianov Family

ONE fine Sunday morning I received from the "Extraordinary Commission" at Samara a somewhat peremptory summons to return. The "Mili-zioner" or militiaman from Pyestravka, where there was a telegraph and telephone, had brought it over, acting on instructions received from Samara. Thereby hangs a tale; and as this little incident gave rise to a sensational story of my "arrest and imprisonment"—a Bolshevik atrocity, in fact, leading eventually to an interchange of telegrams between the Moscow Foreign Office and the Russian delegation in London—I had better record what happened.

To do this, I must revert to a somewhat earlier stage in my travels.

I have already mentioned the obstacles I had to overcome in order to realise my plan of getting away into the country. The Soviet authorities had undertaken to convey the Labour delegation down the Volga, and no doubt this gave them trouble enough, since they left us perfectly free to stop wherever we liked, without notice. We were, in effect, in command of the steamer, although there were many others, including officials, inspectors and so forth, also on board. But the authorities had not bar-

gained for our shooting off at a tangent by ourselves in addition. In my case, a little suspicion might have been pardonable. It was not only that a vague desire to see the country must have seemed an insufficient motive for such exceptional efforts; it happened also that the area I wanted to poke about in was under military control, having been the scene, until shortly before, of much fighting.

My real reason for choosing it was partly that it was at the most distant point that I could hope to reach, and partly that I had heard much of it from Quaker friends who had been doing relief work in another part of the same province. But I could hardly expect men in the throes of a revolutionary war to believe such a tale.

To cut a long story short, I did succeed in obtaining the necessary permit from General Baltiski, the Military Commandant of the South Eastern or Turkestan front. But it was necessary also, technically, to obtain the approval of the Samara Soviet, or rather its "Presidium"—the chairman, secretary, etc.—which acts as its executive in day-to-day affairs. And the "Presidium" had been in touch with M. Losovski, a prominent member of the All-Russian Council of Trade Unions, who was with us on the steamer, and was, I suspected, opposed to my going.

I had to submit a written request to the Soviet. A few minutes before the steamer was due to proceed on her journey, towards evening, the reply arrived. The reply might be a refusal, I reflected, and then all my efforts, and my military permit as well, would be wasted. What was I to do? It was time for a quick decision.

I may now make a confession which the lapse of time has rendered innocuous, and which Losovski and the Samara Chairman, if they should ever hear of it, will forgive—I slipped the Soviet's reply into my pocket, *unopened*.

Seizing my bag, I had just time to escape by the lower gangway, as the ropes were loosed. Losovski was on the upper deck, looking over the rail. He shouted to me that I had not received the Soviet's permission. I shouted back that I had got the General's. By this time the current had caught the steamer and she was on the move. "You must go back to Moscow at once," he yelled. His fury grew as the distance between us widened. I stood on the rickety wooden pier, with my hands in my pockets, and tried to look grave. It must have been most painful for him. At last she disappeared into the twilight, and I stood alone.

Thus it came about that I reached Ozero, as I have described at the beginning of this narrative. And thus it was that, on the Sunday morning in question, I received—not at all to my surprise—the peremptory summons to which I have alluded.

When I received the summons, I bethought me of the communication from the Samara Soviet, which lay, still unopened, in my pocket book. I took it out, tore the envelope, and read it. It was, as I had suspected, a refusal of my request.

It read as follows:—

"*Heard*:—A deposition of the English subject, Citizen Buxton, with regard to the granting to him of the right of temporary residence within the limits of the Samara Government. *Resolved*:—Taking into

consideration : (1) That peace with England has not yet been concluded ; (2) That according to an order of the People's Commissary for Foreign Affairs, questions of granting rights of residence to foreign subjects within the confines of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic may not be settled by the local authorities without special warrant from the Centre ; (3) That owing to the disrepair of the telegraph apparatus it is impossible in such a short time to communicate with the Centre—the request of Citizen Buxton IS REFUSED.”

I made no haste to move, but consulted several of my new acquaintances. Chetvergov, President of the Soviet, was very serious about it. He felt his importance at stake ; I must return at once. Emilianov was critical. He read the document with care, and was, on the whole, for ignoring the whole business. He put up the good legal point that, as I had not asked for the “right of residence” (*zhitelstva*) at all, the refusal of such right was no refusal of the right to travel.

Petrov at last proposed a compromise. We would get a carriage, drive over to Pyestravka, the nearest town where there was a telegraph and telephone, and consult the General. This we did in the afternoon. On arrival, we found two telegrams awaiting us. One was from the General himself, urging me to return as soon as convenient. The other was from the Extraordinary Commission at Samara, going back, apparently, on its previous decision ; it not only permitted me, but “invited” me, to stay in Ozero as long as I liked ! What led up to these changes I do not know, nor is it a matter of much interest.

As the General had shown me great kindness, I did not like to ignore his request, and accordingly decided to leave Ozero on the following day (instead of the day after, as I had intended), and make my way towards Samara.

The farewell was a sad one. I do not know whether I captured the hearts of the Emilianov family, but they had certainly wound their way into mine. They entirely refused to accept any money, though it is quite customary to give it on such occasions. I felt I must make what return I could, so I left behind for Emilianov an old spare suit—a gift which was hailed with cries of delight. On Maria I bestowed a yet more sensational gift. Housewives will realise Maria's feelings—after going short of washing materials for years—when I tell them that it was a packet of "Lux."

All the family and most of their neighbours crowded round the little cart, in which Petrov and I reclined, rather than sat, awkwardly bolstered up by the usual sacks of hay. These occasions must always be sad, for the conventional "au revoir" (of which the familiar Russian *da-svidania* is a literal translation) is a mockery under such circumstances. It is a thousand to one against.

CHAPTER XVI

Wire Entanglements—Petrov's Peculiarities— Was I spied upon?

THE journey back, though we took a different route and saw several other villages, led us through similar experiences to those of the journey out. It would be tedious, perhaps, to relate them.

I will mention one, however. This was the discovery of traces of the civil war of 1918 and 1919, when the land had been ravaged, first by the Czechoslovaks, then by Kolchak, and then by the plundering Cossack bands, which took advantage of the anarchy following upon the repulse of Kolchak. Of these military operations I learned much afterwards from General Baltiski; just now I could note their effects in a great line of trenches and double barbed-wire entanglements. It stretched, as far as I could trace it, somewhere about seven miles along a huge crest of the downs. From one point of view, there was something even more appalling in this sight than in the terrible wreckage of the Northern French towns and railway junctions. In this land, which was starving for almost everything—in which, above all, the products of the highly developed industry of Western countries were craved for, and every spare ounce of Russian labour-power should have been devoted to bringing them where they were needed, these miles of barbed wire—made perhaps

in Warrington, Lancs—had been conveyed, by an infinity of patient labour in manufacture and transport, to these remote and lonely places. There I saw them lying uselessly—not even to rot away into oblivion, but to endure—perhaps to puzzle some Russian archæologist a thousand years hence.

Apart from this, there was nothing very new to record.

Over all there was spread the same brilliance of light. It gives a curious unity to all my memories of this time in the country. The lines and colours, never changing except at dawn and twilight, impressed themselves upon my mind till they became ineffaceable.

The same immense outlines of the steppe. The same interminable distances, less deceptive now to the more accustomed eye. The same boundless expanses of pale green and pale blue, in which the steely grey of an occasional lake, or of the Irghiz river when we crossed it, came as a real relief.

The monotony of that landscape, and of the unmeasured extension of it which the imagination conjures up to supplement the vision—became more and more oppressive. The many little novelties which at first relieved it, had now become familiar. There is an awful sadness about the land of the steppes. I had never been in such great spaces before—except at sea, and there one has many companions close at hand. Our only one was the driver, who sat in front of us, hunched into a more or less circular shape, indifferent to time, chewing sunflower seeds one by one.

I ceased to look round me, and took to teaching Petrov English. He had never met an Englishman,

but had been an industrious reader of English poetry, and his language was exclusively literary. He would call a horse a "steed," a girl a "damsel," and so forth.

Petrov was a charming character—friendly and obliging, and gentleness itself. He was a convinced Pacifist, which gave a humorous turn to his appearance; for as he was a telegraphist, and the telegraph was under the military, he had obtained a khaki uniform, and wore the aspect of a man at arms—a "warrior," as he himself innocently described it. It bulged loosely around his slender and rather stooping form; while the peaked cap, a world too large, sat unnaturally on the back of his head, making way in front for a large curl of fair, silky hair. This was matched by a flowing fair moustache.

Like so many Russians, Petrov had a passion for knowing about other countries and other peoples. He was a keen internationalist, and while opposed to Communism in theory, he supported the Third International as the one great hope of drawing mankind together. He was a fluent Esperantist, and on a later occasion (at Nijni Novgorod) I heard him deliver an admirable speech in that language to the local "group." So keen was he on the language that he had abandoned his Russian name in private communications, and called himself by the Esperanto name, "Peĉenego." He signed himself by this name on the photo he gave me at parting.

One of his other notable characteristics was an enthusiasm for bathing, which I have never seen surpassed. We could not pass a creek or a stagnant pool, more than a foot deep, without Petrov hurling

off the hot uniform and immersing himself in the mud with inexpressible delight.

It occurs to me at this point that some ingenious reader, deeply versed in the wiles of the Bolsheviks, may think that Petrov was sent with me to control my movements. Well, for aught I know, he may have been ; though I do not think he made any attempt to perform the task. If he did, he certainly performed it exceedingly ill.

This moment (while Petrov and I bump painfully along in our springless cart for many a weary mile) is as good an opportunity as any other for a word or two on the question whether my movements, here or elsewhere, were in fact restricted with a view to preventing me from learning the truth.

I came to Russia very suspicious on this point. Numerous Russian friends had warned me minutely how some one would be foisted upon me in the guise of a " friend," a " secretary," or an " interpreter," with the purpose of misleading me. I was therefore keenly on the look-out for such subtleties and subterfuges.

Of course there *may* have been some very smart Scotland Yard work going on behind my back ; but I have had considerable experience in the Balkans of being " shadowed "—and I am personally convinced that my movements were entirely unrestricted, both in the country and the town. The truth was of a less flattering nature than some travellers have imagined. It was simply that my movements were not considered important enough to require these elaborate attentions.

CHAPTER XVII

A stern, unbending Priest—His Concern for my Soul—His Defiance of the Government

ON the evening of the first day we arrived at a certain village, whose name I will not give, where we were put up in a large and airy house. After we had washed and had tea, I learned that this was the house where the village priest lodged.

The house was evidently that of a "rich" peasant. The *dvor* behind was large and beautifully tidy. The veranda at the back of the house (on which Petrov and I slept that night) was not narrow and grubby like that of Emilianov, but spacious and clean. It had a swept and polished floor, and was furnished with a table. The house was also—a great relief—comparatively free from flies.

I soon noticed, however, that the house was distinguished by something more unusual—a kind of hush about all its proceedings, lending to them a certain dignity. This, it was clear, was connected with the presence of the priest. When I expressed a wish to see him, the hostess pointed in a rather solemn manner to the door into the inner room. "He is busy," she said, "but no doubt he will see you later on. Please remember not to smoke when you go in there."

Later on, she announced that he was ready to

receive us. Petrov and I entered the room, which was empty. We sat down at a little table on which was a tiny oil lamp. The priest, we now saw, occupied a room opening out of this one. He kept us waiting a little, much as Cabinet Ministers do when they wish to impress you with their importance. Then his door opened and revealed a more brightly lighted room within, with its *eikons* and its books. He came swiftly towards us—a small man with small features—with the most perfect ease and self-assurance, and with a real, though somewhat cold courtesy. Every movement seemed studied, and the impression was deepened by the meticulous care with which his hair and beard were tended. This, of course, is common with priests of the Orthodox Church. One may smile at it, but no one who has not seen it can realise how beautiful a man's hair can be made to look, if only he takes enough trouble about it.

I suspect that his deliberate and rather distant behaviour did much to foster the atmosphere of reverence with which he was surrounded.

I plunged, in my usual blundering way, into politics. I hoped to learn how the Revolution, in his opinion, had affected the Church. He answered me frigidly. "It has not affected the Church in the slightest degree," he said. I soon began to see what he meant. To ask how the Revolution affected the Church was like asking how the night mists affected the moon; for him She rode, serene and changeless, above all the trivialities of political turmoil.

I pressed him to explain himself, and he admitted there were troubles about money, prohibitions as to

teaching, infidel propaganda, and so forth. "But these are small matters," he added. "The Church goes on as before."

He was not going to let me conduct the conversation; and dismissing politics with a gesture of contempt, he passed to the things of real interest. He began to speak more sympathetically than before. "I wish to talk about religion," he said.

I have always regretted that I did not rise to the occasion more adequately. I was desperately tired and a little bit irritated, though I hope I concealed it. Then my Russian was quite inadequate to such a conversation, though I knew enough of the usual jargon of politics to get on with that subject. However, the priest drew me along, whether I would or no; and Petrov not only interpreted, but discussed the talk with me afterwards, so that I feel clear enough as to its purport. We touched on many topics, but the problem round which the priest's mind was working all the time was the state of my soul.

Priest.—"To what Church do you belong?"

Self.—"I was brought up in the Church of England, but afterwards I became a Quaker."

P.—"Why did you leave your Church?"

S.—"Because I could not believe all that I was told in it. I wanted to be more free. Do you know who the Quakers are?"

P.—"Yes, I know all about them. They are good enough people. But that is not the point. The Church of England is the Church of your country, just as our Church is the authorised Church here. You ought not to have left it. It is dangerous, very dangerous, for your soul."

S.—“ I cannot be always worrying about my own soul.”

P.—“ But it is the business of religion to save people’s souls.”

S.—“ I think it is the business of religion to save humanity, and people should think about that, not about their own souls.”

P.—“ No, you are wrong. It is the only thing that matters. If each man thinks about saving his own soul, then humanity as a whole will be saved.”

The priest dwelt much on this theme. At last he rose to go, as princes rise when they wish to bring to an end an interview with a subject.

“ Good-bye,” he said, “ I shall pray for you. And ”—with real pity in his voice—“ I hope I shall meet you in heaven.” Then he added, as if it was rather a struggle for him to say it, “ But I do not think that I shall.” And with that he took leave of us, closing, quietly but firmly behind him, the door of his inner room.

I was repelled at first by this singular man, with his stern, unbending dogmatism. But as I thought over his attitude, and as I learned more of the state of affairs in that village, my feelings began to change towards admiration. It was evident that he was leading and inspiring the whole village. He was no Vicar of Bray. He was an open counter-revolutionary—no doubt a formidable opponent of the new *régime*.

One of the first things I was told by the peasant who drove us on the next stage of our journey, was that very few would send their children to the village school. I asked why.

“ It is a godless school,” he replied. “ They do

not teach the laws of God. They teach only dances and songs."

But the priest was not going to let it remain so if he could help it. Though it was strictly forbidden for priests to teach in the public schools, he was flatly defying the law. Three days a week he was entering the school and giving his religious teaching there. It could not be done in the dark. The Military Commissar of that village was not doing his duty if he did not report the fact to the Soviet authorities. The priest was risking his liberty and his livelihood.

I noticed another sign which, I should conjecture, was not unconnected with the clerical atmosphere of the village—I mean the presence of beggars. I never saw one in any of the other villages I visited. Here there were quite a number, haunting the neighbourhood of the Church, appealing to the love of Christ—plucking your heartstrings as only Russian beggars can.

After breakfast on the veranda, in the delicious coolness of the early morning, we made ready to go. Our cart, however, was surrounded at once by quite a crowd of people, who had taken this opportunity, it seemed, of organising a kind of deputation. They were, I understood, some of the "notables" of the village. And they wished to lay their case before us, they said.

"We are living under a Government of brutes (*zuyerini*). It is like Catherine the Great's time. We are no better than slaves."

Their expressions far exceeded, in their openness and vigour, anything that I had heard in other villages.

I seemed to see behind it all the stern little priest, fighting his fight with cool determination, with his eyes open, with his goal clear before him, indifferent to the personal consequences. I felt that, if he would have sent me to the stake with equanimity, he would have gone to it with just the same equanimity himself.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Clerk-Captain—His Plans for reviving Country Life—Ovid among the Goths

I SHOULD, anyhow, have placed my next interview side by side with the last, for the sake of the striking contrast which it presented. But as a matter of fact, it happened next. At the village (Vyazovka) where I stopped to rest on the next day, I fell in with a man who stood for the twentieth century as definitely as the priest had stood for the Middle Ages. I will call him the Clerk-Captain, for I never ascertained his name.

He was stationed at Vyazovka in command of some 200 soldiers, whose business it was to collect stores for the Army on the Turkestan front. He was in charge of this particular station or *étape*. They had to get together, by hook or by crook, cattle, sheep, pigs, hay and potatoes, and forward them to the front. (Horses were bought, as I have described above, in the open market.)

He had been here a whole year, and it was deadly dull. His handsome young face, with short, curly brown beard, positively beamed with joy as he welcomed us at his headquarters, and afterwards led us round to tea at his house. It was not long before we knew his whole story, which came out in a flood of conversation.

He had been a clerk in a commercial office, with

no particular interest in anything but business, when the War swept him into the Army. But he was a man who could not be idle, and he was full of public spirit. Planted down in this remote spot, he was going to make things hum.

He had therefore started a great scheme for the establishment of an "Artel"—just like the city clerk at home when he takes to a country life, and tries to draw his neighbours into co-operative societies, and "promote the small holdings movement."

An "Artel," strictly speaking, is an association of workers who jointly and mutually guarantee the performance of certain work. As applied to agriculture, it means an association, generally of "poor" peasants, who hold a certain amount of land and stock in common, dividing the produce equally; but who have at the same time a certain amount of private property, which they work in the ordinary way. As a rule, they build a new village or group of houses, in which they all live side by side.

An "Artel" is vaguely regarded as having a "Communist" tendency, though not so much so as an agricultural "commune," which is a more thorough-going form of community life. It is a bit of self-assertion on the part of the "poor," and is looked on with suspicion by the "rich" peasants. The Clerk-Captain told me that some of the latter had said to him, "Suppose the situation changes, and a new Government comes into power; they will shoot you, because you were in the Artel." Anyhow, he was going to take the risk. He was bubbling over with his plans, and gave me a detailed and glowing account of them.

"We are going to begin this autumn. There are to be about one hundred of us, and I shall be a member. We shall get out of this dirty place, and build a new village altogether. We shall get stock, machines, and wood for our houses from the Agricultural Department at Samara. They make grants of these things, as far as they will go. They give the preference to Soviet farms, of course. Next in order come the "communes"; then the Artels. We have to undertake to provide the Government, in return, with a stipulated quantity of foodstuffs.

"We shall run our Artel on the collective principle to the utmost extent possible. Of course we shall have an elected Soviet. We shall divide the produce of the common land in exactly equal shares. If a member has a surplus, over and above his needs, from his own private ground, he will be obliged to sell it to the Artel. Thus the capital of the Artel will gradually increase; it will acquire more and more stock and machines. Soon we shall build a common warehouse. Then we shall start a garden."

With all his enthusiasm for the "revival of country life," he was still a townsman to the fingertips. You could feel it in his consciousness of the monotony of it all, as well as in his sense of the picnic character of this life into which he had been so oddly transplanted. His humorous apologies for his rustic surroundings were not those of a countryman. He felt himself to be, as Touchstone has it, "like honest Ovid among the Goths."

He was distinctly favourable to the Communist point of view, and was in fact of the best type of Communist. He was not uncritical; he denounced the stupidity of the town authorities in making their

demands so often at an inconvenient time, with too little thought for the susceptibilities of the peasants.

He had evidently befriended a local landlord who (aided by personal popularity, it seemed) had been allowed to retain his house and his land intact, but whose position was growing increasingly difficult under the new *régime*. This landlord's wife was driving out as we passed, and from their conversation I gathered that he had been of some help to them in their troubles. He patted the old horse, and remarked how well he was looking. I note this, because it was the only time I ever saw a Russian show that sense of a horse as an individual, so familiar to us Englishmen.

CHAPTER XIX

General Baltiski—A Tsarist Officer in the Service of the Republic

So, by easy stages, we drifted back to Samara.

Naturally, my first care was to seek out the General. I found him strolling back from "G.H.Q." to his private house, a large bundle of papers in his hand. There was nothing—to the unprofessional eye at any rate—to distinguish him from the ordinary soldier. The day of gold lace, orders, and the like was over. He had a neat white uniform, suitable to the broiling weather.

After the first greeting he took occasion to explain that, strictly speaking, I should address him not as "General," but as "Comrade." The word for "Commanding Officer" was merely the present participle "commanding" (*komanduyushchi*), which implied that the holder of the office is not necessarily there for ever, but may be replaced by another comrade at any time. However, having made the position clear (as in duty bound), I do not remember that the General made any further objection when I relapsed into the customary style.

Of about fifty years of age, with fair hair and beard, only just beginning to turn grey, short, but broad and erect, and in the pink of health, he looked a man accustomed to command. It needed no feathers or epaulettes to prove that.

He was full of apologies for bringing me back,

though I explained that I should have had to start homewards in any case the following day.

"The Soviet people got worried about it," he said. "It seems they had told you not to go. These things will happen. I thought it was best to humour them, so I urged you to come back."

Nor was this all; I received a formal visit next day from two representatives of the Soviet itself, who "expressed regret" that they had been under a "misunderstanding." I doubt whether a foreigner, straying against orders in a military area in time of actual war, is often treated as handsomely. So ended my "arrest and imprisonment."

But to return to General Baltiski. He had taken a great interest in my journey, and was anxious to know all I could tell him about the peasants, and their state of feeling. This I did as faithfully as I could, though of course without mentioning names.

Then he turned to his own experiences in the service of the Soviet Government, and appealed to me very strongly to make his opinions known. I mentioned the name of an officer on the former Tsarist General Staff, whom I had met in London. "One of my oldest friends," he said. "I was on the General Staff too. Tell him all I am going to tell you now. Tell him he ought to be here."

And warmed by the thought of this common acquaintance, the General developed quite a fatherly manner towards me. There was something pathetic in his intense desire to make me a mouthpiece for his appeal to his fellow-officers of the old Army to come and help Russia. They could not understand him, and he could not get at them. Here, perhaps, was a chance for him at last.

"This is the only possible Government," he insisted. "The people now in power are not the equals of Peter the Great, but they are doing Peter the Great's work in holding Russia together. Kolchak was an honest man, with every advantage on his side. But his forces were rent by party quarrels. His orders got twisted in one direction or another, and didn't get executed. The Communists' orders go right through to the bottom; they get obeyed."

"What would have happened if Kolchak had got into power?" I queried.

"Nothing but this, that the whole revolutionary movement would have been driven underground. Later it would have come to the top again, and the whole thing would have ended in another Revolution."

"Would not the Allies have kept him going?"

"No. They would have tried to, but they would not have succeeded. The Allies want to abase Russia and to exploit her. It is impossible. They cannot do it."

"Is the Soviet Government holding its own? Are things improving or getting worse?"

"Make no mistake about it," answered the General. "Things are on the up-grade. We have passed the lowest point of the curve, and we are beginning to go up again. Look at the Turkestan Railway for an example. Not so long ago it took a month to get from here to Tashkent. Now it takes five days. Have you seen Brusilov's appeal to the officers who are now abroad—his appeal to them to come back and help Russia? Tell my friends of that."

"Yes," I said, "but I know what your friends will

answer. They will say they are not going back to be ordered about by a lot of incompetent Commissars."

"Then they don't understand the situation," he rejoined. "These people allow us to work freely. I can follow my own methods. There is my Chief of Staff—a colonel who served under me in the old days."

"But," I objected, "what about the Political Commissars who are attached to every Command?"

"Well," he said, "they did interfere a bit at first, but now they do so very rarely. The situation is getting easier all the time. Every document has to be countersigned by 'So-and-so, Member of the Revolutionary Military Tribunal.' But that's not such a bad thing after all. Specialists are inclined to go along like a horse in blinkers. These political men are often valuable. They keep us in touch with the general public opinion outside. No, that's not a serious difficulty. We can work for Russia. Tell my friends they ought to be here—working for Russia."

CHAPTER XX

Fishing—Trekking—" Bolshevik Atrocities "

ON my return to Samara I had learned that, by waiting a few days, I could have the company of Petrov and two others on my journey back to Moscow, whither they were going on Government business. Accordingly, I obtained permission to sleep on board a Volga steamer which was lying tied up at the quay. This, I was told, was probably better than anything the Soviet could provide in the town. I was, in point of fact, the guest of the Trade Union of River Transport Workers, who controlled, at this time, the whole Volga fleet.

Every day I had dealt out to me an unvarying, but excellent ration of bread, butter, eggs, and radishes. It was brought to me by a comrade who, in capitalist lands, would have been styled a "steward." He and two or three others slept on board. I occupied a first-class cabin (*minus* all its old cushions and appurtenances), but slept on deck. The midges at dawn and twilight were numerous and fierce; but I found a way of tying my silk neckerchief in such a way as to cover everything except the tip of my nose.

This was a somewhat monotonous time, but I whiled it away completing the notes which I had made in the villages (I always made notes on the spot) and by watching the life around me.

There was a man who used to fish from the bank with a circular net, fitted to a very long rod with a stout line. Just next to the net was a straight stick weighted at one end, which I suppose ensured that the net should go straight downwards and spread out on the bottom. I watched him for hours. He would fling his net upstream, let the current work it down, and draw it out again. I never on one single occasion saw him catch anything. I suppose he would have answered inquiries with the usual "Nichevo." A volume might be written on this phrase. It is often translated, "It does not matter," "It's all the same." As far as I could make out, it may mean almost anything—except, perhaps, enthusiastic assent or dissent. It may mean "Nothing in particular," "I don't know," "All right," "It's no business of mine," "Quite fairly good," "Pretty much as you would expect," "So so."

Then there was the curious population of the river bank. Now, in the famine time, we are told that it is swarming with families on the move. Even then, there were quite a number of them. The Russian peasant's habit of "trekking," as they say in South Africa, is quite extraordinary. There seems to be always a large section of the population occupied in journeying immense distances. In the villages the peasants often complained to me that they were not allowed to go and fetch salt from some salt lakes more than 100 miles away. No one thought anything of making such a journey in a cart over roadless country. Here in Samara, I talked with a peasant family who were travelling from Nijni Novgorod, hundreds of miles from their

home, where they had gone for the whole winter, to see a relative. They were waiting for a permit to return to their village home. They had already waited a week, and did not seem to mind. They got one meal per day from the local Soviet.

A man who was in Russia during the War told me that the peasants, in a village where he was, heard that there was a travelling circus in another village many miles away. Some of them set out on a Saturday in their carts, brought back the performers and their whole outfit (including the merry-go-round, taken to pieces) to their own village, ran the circus all Sunday, and packed it up and carted it back again on the Monday.

One thing began to hang very heavy on my mind during these monotonous days. This was the drought. There had not been the slightest sign of rain since I had been in Russia. I remembered the old peasant, and the prophecy which he had quoted from Ezekiel—"I will make my earth as stone." What was going to happen to this vast, inaccessible peasant population, if their crops should fail? I thought of Ozero, with the reserve in its common village barn already somewhat depleted, and only one-third of the usual acreage prepared for this year's harvest. One evening the clouds gathered and the thunder began to roll. My hopes rose high, though I felt unaccountably nervous and uneasy. Not a drop fell; the clouds dispersed as they had come; and the heavens were as brass once more.

One morning I received a visit from a certain foreigner living in Samara, whose conversation is perhaps worth recording, because it took me sharply back into a different world from that of practical

realities in which I had been living. In listening to him I felt again, with something of a start, the atmosphere of the foreign newspapers which regale their readers with "Bolshevik atrocities." There is plenty to be said against the Communist *régime*, but people in Russia do not put it in that crude way. For obvious reasons I do not give his name.

He told me that he wished to put the Labour Delegation on the right track and prevent it from being misled by interested persons. He then launched out into the familiar denunciations. Of these I did not note down much, as I had heard them so often before. But he made three statements which, to me, after mixing a good deal with Russians of all classes, were really humorous. One was, "The schools are absolutely ruined. No children go to them." The second was, "All religious gatherings are absolutely forbidden." The third was, "The peasants have everything taken from them. No peasant is allowed to have more than two cows." Each of these statements was directly contradicted by my own recent experience. The second was contradicted, apparently, by his own experience also, for later on he told me that in Samara a friend of his had delivered a lecture (at which prominent Communists were present) on "Why we should believe in God." It was in reply to a Communist lecture on "Why we should not believe in God."

CHAPTER XXI

Up the Volga—"Aunt Lisa"—Back to Nijni Novgorod

At last, one afternoon, a steamer called in on her upward journey. It was a great event, for was she not the first steamer worked with oil since Baku was recovered from the British? The steamers I had seen hitherto had been burning wood. This, of course, involved an appalling amount of labour in collection and transport; it prevented most of the deck space from being used for cargo, and it meant that the tanks constructed for the oil were wasted. This was far from being the only example by which the injuries of the invasions and the blockade had been brought vividly home to me. I witnessed on every side their deadly effect upon the transport system. I saw the great railway bridge over the Volga, blown up by Kolchak, or to stop the advance of Kolchak—I forget which. This meant the snapping of an indispensable link in a chain upon which depended the supplies of a whole province.

The steamer was bound for Nijni with a cargo of dried fish from the Caspian. They filled the hold. They hung in interminable festoons (with strings threaded through their gills) all round the gunwales of the ship. Their pungent smell penetrated into every corner of her, heralded her arrival, and doubtless prolonged the memory of her departure.

I now made the acquaintance of my two new travelling companions. They were, I learned, Colovin and his wife. Colovin was an official in the War Department. Petrov and I occupied one cabin, and they another. There were no general feeding arrangements on the ship, but we had each had a certain store of necessaries dealt out to us before starting. Colovin and his wife invited us to share all our meals with them in their cabin.

This provided many pleasant talks during the three days and nights of our slow voyage upstream to Nijni. The lady proved to be a Roumanian from Bessarabia. She was the soul of gaiety. She was very small, with tiny hands and feet. She had, however, the large mobile mouth which all jesters ought to have. By way of ironical reference to her extreme youthfulness she had earned the nickname of "Aunt Lisa" (*Tyotya Lisa*).

For all meals Petrov and I used to repair to the Colovins' cabin, and many were the jokes as we crowded into that minute space. Aunt Lisa was an ingenious, though variable cook. She was certainly untidy, but there was much to excuse this in the circumstances; and there was nothing slatternly about her untidiness; she was too conscious of the fun of it all. The meals were at all hours. We would go for six or eight hours without one, till I was famishing. We would then have a solid one. Then, to my amazement, within two hours or so, I would again hear Aunt Lisa calling out "food" (*kushat*), or tapping on my door with a spoon; and we would start all over again. They seemed to eat whenever they felt inclined, regardless of all regularity.

I would sit on deck and watch the mighty barges

towed rapidly past, going down stream. From time to time, too, would come a great raft of timber, perhaps a quarter of a mile in length, wriggling its way down like a gigantic water serpent, with two or three little wooden houses on its back, and a whole population of men, women and children.

The steamer was packed with passengers, mostly camping in little family groups, with their own separate cooking and eating arrangements.

We would stop for hours at some rickety landing stage while the Volga dockers unloaded the fish barrels to the tune of the "Dubinochka." (Strictly speaking, the word means a wooden "pile," such as they drive in to support the banks). The foreman would start with the solo :—

"Ho! my little doves. Ho! my jolly mates,
It's going now, it's going now. . . ."

Then the rest would strike in, the men on one rope singing "It won't go" (*a ne poidyot*), and the men on the other rope answering, "It will go" (*a vot idyot*) in endless strophe and antistrophe.

As soon as the ship touched a stopping-place, Aunt Lisa was on shore, chaffering away for eggs, milk, vegetables and bread. She flitted like a bird from one seller to another, taking in the whole market. She had a delicate nose for values, and was a fine bargainer. She always left her final shot till the ship was just starting, calculating coolly the exact time it would take her to bolt back across the moving gangway. I well remember her helping me to bargain for a little woven bag from Turkestan at one of the places where we stopped. It was a great sight to see the theatrical scorn with which she

rejected an inadequate offer, and turned on her heel like a tragedy queen.

She was imperturbable, too, in all sorts of circumstances. The oddest of these was at Nijni Novgorod, where we were housed in the old Government offices (now the Soviet House) in the midst of the Kremlin—in a room containing many tables covered with dispatch-boxes and portentous inkstands, and also four stiff, green plush sofas, on which the four of us slept.

By the time we reached Nijni, however, I felt that we had come back to ordinary civilisation (did we not see Chaikovski's *Queen of Spades* the same night at the Opera?) We were moving in a different world and beginning to feel again the hot breath of the revolutionary struggle. The calm of the old slow-moving Russia, which had surrounded me in the villages, still persisted on the river journey. When I stepped off the steamer for the last time, a door closed behind me.

CHAPTER XXII

The Last Talk—A Painful Question—Muddy Waters

It was on the last evening before we reached Nijni that I had seemed to come nearest to the troubled atmosphere of the towns. I had been walking the upper deck alone, when a Soviet official who occupied another first-class cabin put his head out of the window (which opened on to the deck) and started a conversation. Other people from the various groups came and listened.

There was a seat running along under the windows, against the wall of the cabins. I sat on this with one or two others ; some sat on the ground and a few stood. The twilight was coming on. I saw them—I can see them still—against the background of brown, swirling water, bounded by the long monotonous line of mud bank.

Most of them were in some form or other of country dress, though there were evidently two or three men of education among them. There were dark-bearded men from Astrakhan, with tall fur caps. Loose white tunics were common, and so, of course, were top boots. There were all sorts of odd combinations. Russians are by no means conventional in their dress ; Colovin, for instance, wore a complete suit of a light mauve colour, such as we should think suited only to pyjamas ; but no one turned to look at him more than at other people.

The talk fell on the usual topics—prices, poverty,

the shortage of all the things needed, the hardness of life. Most blamed the Government. Some one objected that it was not the Government, but "the War," that was to blame for these things. When would things improve?

All agreed that Russia was ruined if she stood alone. Foreigners must help. What were the foreigners doing? Why were they making war on Russia?

Everywhere in Russia I found a great hunger to know what was going on outside the country. There was something moving about the sense of forlornness and loneliness which their long isolation from the world had engendered in the Russian people. In the warmth of their welcome to me I always seemed to see a craving for fellowship and for knowledge. I was a being who had come, without hostile intent, from that mysterious outside world, and presumably could report what was going on there.

"Well," said one, "they will never help Russia so long as we have a revolutionary Government."

"Then they will never help us at all," said another. "We are not going back to the old state of things."

This statement was not disputed. I do not know whether any disputed it in their hearts, but at any rate no one spoke. There was a pause.

"Supposing the foreign countries also get revolutionary Governments?" suggested one.

"Ah, there you are," chimed in another, "that's what the Communists say. You've only got to wait a little, and Germany will have a Communist Revolution, Poland will have one, France perhaps, England perhaps, and then—there you are."

"Yes," replied the first, "and the Communists are right. The World-Revolution is coming. It's only a question of time. We must hold out till then, and the foreign Governments will help us. They will send us machines, and experts, and money. There will be no more blockades and no more war."

They discussed the matter up and down among themselves. The prevailing opinion seemed to be that, if the "World-Revolution" did come, all would be well for Russia; but as to whether it would come or not, there was no general agreement.

At last some one turned to me and asked what I thought about it. I had hoped to escape this question, for I did not want to be cutting away what seemed their only ground of hope.

"How can I tell?" I said. "How can any one tell?"

"Well, what do you think?" my questioner persisted. "*Is the World-Revolution coming?*"

"I do not think so myself," I said.

And with that a silence fell on the little group. They lingered awhile, talking of indifferent subjects. Then one by one they rose, and stole off to the various family encampments in different corners of the deck.

I sat watching the darkness come down on the vast expanse of muddy waters, till the bank was blotted out of sight, and wondered whether this was an occasion on which it would have been better to tell a lie.

THE END.

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